

BYGONE DAYS RECALLED

AN OLD TIMER'S REMINISCENCES OF PEOPLE AND EVENTS.

How the Famous Old Charter of St. John was First Amended by the Efforts of Alderman W. H. Needham—Talking Against Time—Laughable Incidents for Old Timers.

Some forty years ago, our City Council was divided, being composed of two branches, an upper and lower house as it were—known as Aldermen and Assistants, although they all sat together, and looked alike, as far as dress and dignity went. The only difference between them was that while aldermen might act as Judges once a week in the City Court, the assistants were debarred this privilege and the fees appertaining thereto, because, I suppose, the assistants were considered to be only half fledged Magistrates, not having influence enough in their respective wards to qualify them for the upper strata in the Councils of the City. But the Assistants had as much to say, or said as much at the Board as their superiors in title, and were just as useful members. This has been changed—all now are Aldermen alike, exercising the same magisterial functions and perforce, Judges when required—so much for the strides of democracy in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, and the spirit of John Wilkes, the famous London M. P., citizen and demagogue of the last century.

Then, the good old Corporate Charter granted to St. John by George the Third! This instrument fifty years ago was as sacred, I had almost said, as the koran, in the estimation of the old Aldermen and some of their Assistants, and so thought many of the older fossilized inhabitants. You might destroy the Constitution, abolish all the sanguinary laws upon the statute book, which demanded blood for stealing a shilling—you might fire at the fish upon Trinity steeple spire, a venerated object, and commit any sacrilege you pleased in connection with church properties—you might murder all the Tories in the country and black bean all the Radicals—in short, there was nothing too wicked that a man might do; in fact, treat the Court "with contempt," but mark ye! the Old Charter of St. John stood above all law or change, irrevocable as a Persian edict which was chiselled so high upon the rocks that no human being could possibly touch it. But we shall see as we proceed. "The best laid plans of mice and men gang aft a-ga'e." Why, at this age of the world, (40 years ago) if a reporter were caught taking notes, with a view of publishing them, at a Coroner's inquest, and thus trying the case in advance, he would be threatened with thumb screws, if not tried and hanged for "breach of privilege." Public information could only be had through strained official channels in a diluted form. At the present day, the Press judges and condemns, or acquits; and, seldom a rascal goes unwhipped of justice. The time will come when the press will be the sole tribunal of the country, when Courts of Justice will only be thought of as reminiscences or exploded rockets, or relegated to the tombs of the Capulets.

The Mayor at that day received his appointment from the Lieutenant-Governor, generally a pretty suitable person. But what I am trying to get at, in this story about the aldermen, is to bring to the mind of your elder readers the prowess of our old friend, Alderman W. H. Needham—a figure as conspicuous in St. John 50 years ago as that of any other in the province—a person of whom it may be said, for versatility, fertility, energy, fearlessness and abilities, as a "Tombs lawyer," and the courage of a lion, his superior it would be hard to match in British America. Had his career been less erratic, he would have risen to the highest place on the bench of his native province. But, alas! he failed every time the prize was just within his reach.

But it required just such a person, and at the precise time, to grapple with the old Royal adamant charter, and to see exactly of what its vitality and complex character consisted, to insure for it such wonderful worship. Now, Needham had learned when going to school that the old United States once belonged to George the Third, or rather his empire, and was held by a more sacred bond than all the charters which his majesty had ever granted—and so by parity of reasoning he thought that if the King could be forced to surrender so much valuable property for nothing, our reformer could not see why the old charter should not come in for a little overhauling—besides, if O'Connell once boasted that he could drive a coach and six through any Imperial statute, why not drive a pony wagon through an antiquated bit of musty parchment. He saw where the charter had outlived its usefulness—had not the penny press for some time been doing good work in informing the masses of changes and reforms necessary in all branches of the public service, as well socially, morally and politically—and was not the time opportune for just such a man to take John Bull by the horns? Certainly it was all within reason, and our little friend was the Sancho for the onslaught.

On bringing the charter for the first time before the council for amendment, Needham was assailed on all sides, especially by the older aldermen, as a very

wicked man, a traitor to his Queen (the old King was gone) and country, a rebel worse than Fitzgerald or Emmet, aye even Washington himself—but then as Washington had never told a lie, and been a little victorious, that gentleman's name was only mentioned in whispers. Then the cry was taken up out of doors. Needham had attacked the Royal Charter of blessed memory. So the first onslaught upon Needham gave him but little encouragement to proceed. But he knew he was right, and had some good backers, (for there were radicals in those days) and he again came to the assault on a subsequent meeting of the Council, very plucky and very demonstrative. He had a squeaky voice, and when he got it to its highest pitch it was loud and shrill enough to be heard away back of the dead house and neighborhood. At every meeting he poured in shot and shell heavily so that his missiles gradually began to tell upon the weakening walls of the old iron-sides. After bombarding week after week, and supposing he might safely get out of the trenches and openly make the assault, he one day charged home a series of resolutions in condemnation of certain sections in the Charter, desiring to substitute others in lieu thereof. This day in particular was selected by our hero to make the attack, from the fact that the old folks at the Board had taken alarm that the ground was weakening under them, and the glorious old Charter was doomed, unless a coup d' main could be resorted to by way of heading Needham off. A petition had been prepared to be sent by that afternoon's mail (English mails once a fortnight) to be laid at the foot of the throne, informing her majesty what was brewing, and to be prepared to put her foot upon the amended Charter should it ever get through the legislature and be sent to England for the Royal assent. The intention of the obstructives was to bring up the petition and pass it, and send it by that afternoon's mail. But Needham was not to be foiled. He got possession of the floor at 2 o'clock and commenced his harangue, determined to talk until five, at which hour the mail was to close—and he talked—and talked—and talked—as no man but Needham could talk. The more he was interrupted the better it was for him, as it furnished him with fresh fuel to keep the flames going. For example, about 4 o'clock one of the old aldermen contradicted the speaker by saying there was no such thing in the charter (neither was there), upon which Needham was dilating, when he suddenly stopped, and then, after a pause and mopping his forehead, and taking a glass of water, he said that he was not bound to give the council brains, especially as they had ears enough; but he continued that in order to prevent further misunderstandings and interruptions, he would commence de novo and read the charter through, and comment upon each section seriatim, and the aldermen might discuss the points as they went along. Now, this meant a whole day's debate, for it would take several hours to read the charter of itself. The old folks by this time were wearied out, and saw that they would have no chance whatever to get in their petition, for Needham had a right to the floor, and it was going on to 5 o'clock, so one of the old folks made a motion to adjourn—carried—and Needham gained his point. It is due to the memory of this gentleman to say that to W. H. Needham is the city of St. John indebted for its first and greatest act of civic reformation.

In my next chapter I will inform you of the exploits of another gentleman, who once held a seat at the old common council board—an assistant alderman—fully as interesting a character as Needham.

AN OLD TIMER.

THE OLDEST LETTER.

It was Written in St. John just a Century and a Quarter Ago.

Christmas just a century and a quarter ago had very little joy for those who lived where now stands St. John. They were few in number, and the settlement had not even a name, save the general but then sufficiently definite one of St. John River. A letter sent from Massachusetts to such an address could not well go astray, for beyond the mouth of the river was a then unsettled wilderness.

The story of the pioneers is one of a hard struggle against the obstacles which their isolation and the rugged nature of the country created. They were of hardy stock, however, and fought their fight well, though perhaps not always as patiently as we may now think. But they stayed where they had cast their lot, and in later years they had their reward.

James Simonds came from Newburyport in August, 1762, and settled at Portland point. He was probably well equipped for the first winter, but his wants as the second began are hinted at in the following letter, the original of which is now in the possession of Mr. J. W. Lawrence. It will be seen that hay was imported from Massachusetts in those days. When the Loyalists landed in 1783, Messrs. Simonds, Hazen and Peabody, were owners of all the land north of Union street, as far as the Kennebecasis river:

ST. JOHN'S RIVER, Dec. 26, 1764. MESSRS. BLODGETT & HAZEN: I have long waited with impatience for the arrival of the sloop with goods, stores, etc.; have now given her over for lost: the only hope I have is that the winds were contrary in New England as they were

here all the fall, that detained her till too late, and you concluded not to send her.

We had a fine prospect of a good trade the last fall; and had the goods come in season, should by this time have disposed of them to great advantage; but instead of that we have missed collecting great part of our Indian debts, as they expected us up the River and have not been here on that account; besides the disappointment for want of provisions and supply for the men, and hay for our cattle, will not be trifling, as our former must be provided for at retail prices here; the latter sent up the River to be wintered, which will entirely overthrow our plans for this winter, which was to sled wood and limestone for next summer (a much easier way than carting). We have stone dug for five hundred hogs, and near wood enough cut to burn it, that must now lay till carting; and we shift as well as we can to employ our men so as to not have them run us in debt. I have not heard from Passamaquada for six weeks; but fear they have little or no provisions; and am sure they have no hay for a cow that is there. She being exceeding good shall endeavour to save her life till you can send hay for her; I shall go there as soon as the weather moderates (that has been intensely cold lately) and employ the men there as well I can (as they are confined there contrary to intention—for the winter), and return here as soon as possible.

I have been trying and have a great prospect of getting one or two Rights for each of us concerned, and to have my choice: in the township of this River: the land and title as good as any in America (confirmed by the King in answer to our petition). The 'loath to project any scheme that would have the least tendency to involve or hinder us from making speedy remittance; yet being obliged, as I before observed, to leave the business allotted for the winter.

Can think of nothing better than to make a resolute push up the River with our men. Employ some of them at making lumber. Others at clearing land and fitting it for grain in the spring. According as crops heretofore have been, it will more than pay for clearing the first year: the produce equal to cash (bread and meat for all our men, excellent for hemp and flax), and every year be growing more valuable. The men are in low spirits, having nothing to eat but pork and bread—and nothing but water to drink. I therefore pray that you would send the inclosed articles as soon as possible, in the schooner Polly, as those that we have not present use of will sell immediately. Knowing this much, I trust you will lose no time in sending to our relief. Please to give my compliments to all friends.

I am, Gentlemen, your Most obedient Humble Servant, JAS. SIMONDS.

N. B. Memorandum enclosed in Mr. Blodgett's note two days since. This sent if a vessel should touch in at Newbury instead of Boston. To Messrs. Saml. Blodgett & Wm. Hazen, Newbury, Mass.

This letter is probably the oldest St. John letter in existence, but it is very much more legible than the most of the matter which reaches the newspaper offices now. The first important article of import from St. John, it will be seen, was lime, in which today there is a larger and more profitable trade than the ordinary reader would suppose.

"Passamaquada" included all the settled region around Passamaquoddy Bay, but the reference in the letter is probably to Indian Island, where James Boyd and William Chaffrey had settled the previous year.

TWO GENTLEMEN OF MONCTON.

One of Them Somewhat Damaged by a Rear Collision—More to Follow.

A story reaches PROGRESS from Moncton, which, while it seems to have escaped the notice of our special correspondent, has attracted considerable attention in that stirring town, and is likely to attract still more.

It partakes of the nature of a tragedy, and "Two Gentlemen of Verona" pales into insignificance beside this encounter between two gentlemen of Moncton, who met and parted, as the old song says, if not exactly broken hearted, one at least had a broken head.

The meeting took place on a recent afternoon and the scene was on St. George street. The heroes move in the inner circle of Moncton society. The elder gentleman, Mr. C., was crossing the street when he heard someone calling, "hello, hello!" but not recognizing the voice and not being certain that he was the person referred to, he took no notice and kept on crossing the street. Hearing someone repeat twice, "didn't you hear me," he turned round, recognized Mr. H., and replied: "I heard someone but did not think it was you." Mr. H.—at once burst forth into eloquence of a style the reverse of parliamentary, best expressed by dashes, and responded, "— you, I will make you hear me," and immediately began to make Mr. C.—feel him, at any rate; for he struck the elder gentleman a violent blow near the temple with a cane he carried. Mr. C., whose back was partly turned to his assailant at the time, was too much taken by surprise to do more than shake his fist at his rapidly departing foe, and remark, in the heat of the moment, "You cowardly scoundrel; I'll follow you for this." But he heard no reply. He indignantly says that this is the first time he has ever been struck from behind the back.

The wound was sufficiently severe to require the attention of a physician, and has given Mr. C. a great deal of pain since. The result of the affair was that Mr. H. was called before Stipendiary Wortman to answer to the charge of "wounding and causing grievous bodily harm" to Mr. C. The only attempt at defence made was that Mr. H. asked Mr. C. in court if he had not made grimaces at him, which Mr. C. indignantly denied. Arguments of counsel were heard, and judgment was deferred.

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